



# *Make Family Health History a Tradition*

## Questions and Answers

### **Why is my family health history important?**

Health problems that run in your family can increase your chance of developing the problem. This is because family members share their genetics, environment, lifestyles, and habits. But the good news is by knowing your family health history you can make screening and lifestyle choices to lower your risk.

### **What information should I collect?**

Collect information on close family members, such as parents, brothers and sisters, and children. Then collect information on your grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Things that are important to collect include:

- Health problems of family members
- Age when the problem started or was diagnosed
- Age and cause of death
- Lifestyle habits (smoker/nonsmoker, diet, weight, and exercise habits)
- Ethnic background

### **What health problems should I ask my family about?**

A family health history is a useful tool for understanding your tendency to develop just about any health problem. Here are some of the health problems you should ask your family about:

- Alzheimer's or dementia
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Cancers (breast, colon, lung, prostate, ovarian, and other)
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Heart disease or sudden heart attack
- High blood pressure or high cholesterol
- Stroke or blood clots
- Stillbirths, miscarriages, or babies born with birth defects

### **How do I know if I'm at risk for a health problem?**

Everyone's family health history is different. It is important to talk with family members so you become aware of key features in your family history that may increase your chance of having a health problem. These key features help you to know if you are at an increased risk:

- Health problems that occur at an earlier age than expected (10 to 20 years before most people get the disease)
- A health problem in more than one close family member



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- A health problem that does not usually affect a certain gender (for example, breast cancer in a male family member)
- Certain combinations of health problems within a family (for example, breast and ovarian cancer or heart disease and diabetes)

If your family has one or more of these features, you may have an increased risk of developing a problem. Your doctor can explain your risk or refer you for a genetic consultation and help you make healthy choices about screening tests and lifestyle changes. But don't forget that you can lower your risk by eating a healthy diet, exercising, maintaining a healthy weight, and not smoking.

### What if I don't have health problems that run in my family?

Not having a health problem that runs in your family can be good news. But even without a family history, you can still develop a problem. This is because:

- Your lifestyle, personal health history, and environment affect risk
- You may be unaware of health problems in family members
- A family member may have died young before they developed a health problem

Make healthy choices no matter what your family health history is.

### What should I do with my family health history after I've collected it?

Share what you have learned with your doctor and family members. Pass on your family health history to your children and grandchildren. By sharing this with them, you can work together to make healthy choices that could save your lives. And remember to keep your family health history updated and in a safe place.

### How do I get started?

Getting started is easy! Simply talk with your family at reunions, holidays, or other family gatherings. Then write down what you learn and share it with your doctor and family members. Download the free Family Health History Toolkit at [www.health.utah.gov/genomics](http://www.health.utah.gov/genomics) for ideas to help you talk with your family and collect a family health history.

#### References

- CDC Office of Genomics and Disease Prevention [www.cdc.gov/genomics](http://www.cdc.gov/genomics)
- U.S. Surgeon General Family History Initiative [www.hhs.gov/familyhistory](http://www.hhs.gov/familyhistory)
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